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## THE "RIME OF THE ANCIENT MARINER" AS PROPHECY.

### I. THE ALLEGORY.

IF ever a great poet set about his work with a deliberate religious purpose, Coleridge is that man. He believed a new and happier age had begun. His studies in the great philosophic systems of Germany, then new to the world, equipped him, he thought, for the task of reconciling science, political liberty, and the "Truth in Christ." He had, as he tells us in his glorious ode entitled "Dejection," the "Fancy" that made him "dreams of happiness" out of "all misfortunes;" and the "shaping spirit of Imagination" that could give living utterance to subtlest thought and feeling—utterance whereby they obtained a new dignity and a new power. Only when this "spirit" deserted him (for cause) did he turn to mere "abstruse research," the poet dying into critic, expounder of philosophy, and theologian.

It is, of course, as the poet of the "Rime of the Ancient Mariner" that he is most renowned. Had he written nothing else, he would not have been born in vain. Not merely as a stirring ballad, nor for its picturesque qualities, the skilful handling of the supernatural it evinces, does the average reader prize the famous "Rime." Somehow he feels so much "more is meant than meets the ear" or even the mental eye. No doubt he loves it most for the light, mysterious play as of heavenly fingers over the secret keys of his soul, so that unheard music thrills his being through and through.

An allegory it is, but an essentially poetic one, and as such irreducible to plain prose. The poet has always to choose, when attempting to convey abstract thought in concrete form, as for instance, in a narrative, between two evils, that which seems to him least. Either his tale will not be forci-

ble, faithful, plausible enough, as such to interest the reader, save as a vehicle for doctrines that gain his assent; or the doctrine will be forced to recede from the foreground and, now and then, be wholly lost to the sight even of the keenest eye. The charm of the "Faëry Queene" is just this: that Una, Sir Guyon, Britomart, and all Spenser's other delightful figures, are no mere personifications; that often he himself forgets their sense and the sense of their doings and sufferings to take a tale-teller's delight in them and their adventures. Hence, while in Milton's words, "more is meant than meets the ear," it is not always so. At times the story is meaningless—story, and nothing more. When it becomes again significant, our joy in the "sense" is the keener for its brief absence. Allegory, then, rather gains by discreet introduction of meaningless details. For the very reason that they are meaningless, they appear to be full of meaning too deep and wonderful for words. The inexpressible, elusive is suggested. The reader is "teased out of thought," as by Keats's "Grecian Urn," and set to musing for himself. This is surely legitimate poets' charlatanry. At times, to be sure, it has been somewhat maliciously practised, as by the great and shrewd Goethe, who was not above tempting over-ingenious readers to discover marvelous senses in his occasional flashes of deliberate nonsense. And may it not perhaps be true that even our serious Browning set a cunning snare for ultrazealous interpreters now and then out of sheer mischievous delight in watching them sink up to their pensive, hand-supported chins in the quagmire of their own profundity.

A mechanical exegesis of the poem—line by line—would then deservedly expose a critic to ridicule. For surely never was allegory more artistically fashioned by its poet to satisfy first and foremost the demands made of a thrilling tale. Its message is like the perfume of a flower, invisible to the eye that delights in the color and form, and quite unnecessary, so to speak. The beauty suffices that sense. There are no frost-bitten petal edges that have to seek for an excuse in the perfume. The perfume is absolutely over and above

the perfect pleasure of the eye, a free gift to another, more intimate sense. It is to the spirit, rather than to the intellect, that the doctrine of the "Rime" is addressed. But surely it will gain for us every way if we acquaint ourselves with the philosophy and theology of the poet, constituting, so to speak, the atmosphere in which bloomed this perfect, rare-scented, sevenfold flower of a ballad.

Skilfully, the whole weird tale of wondrous incident and experience is told, so that the closing lines leave one in doubt:

A sadder and a wiser man  
He rose the morrow morn.

Perhaps after the astounding relation, you think, do you, that the wedding-guest slept? Such a tale, so told, under the glittering eye of such a teller, could well be expected to scare sleep away for one night at least from the weariest eyelids in the world. But then, it may have been all a dream—that walk with two friends to the wedding-feast, that weird arrest by the seaman, that spell-bound hearing of his yarn—and then how natural would be his waking with the moral well digested, that made him a "wiser" man, and "sadder" only in the sense of not being able to deceive himself as hitherto with regard to what is really "love." He had rightly thought "love" the best thing in the world. He had thought love was chiefly present at the romantic wedding-feast. Has he now no doubt that what is there is always—"love?" *that* divine love that is the most precious thing in the world?

At all events, in the "Rime," the killing of the albatross in a mood of recklessness, for the mere display of skill, brought on the mariner a curse. The Polar Spirit, whose bird it was, demanded the life of its slayer. The law of nature is: "An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth!" His fellows openly disapproved of the deed. They were thus not guilty with the mariner, and the Polar Spirit could not punish him without punishing them; so the fair breeze went on blowing.

But these men judged not of a deed as a deed; they did

not refer it to its motive, or half-conscious impulse, and condemn it for that. For the mariner's guilt as such they cared nothing. It was not the lack of love that allowed of his thoughtless cruelty, or his marksman's vanity that outran his love, which shocked them. They did not judge of the bird-victim by its actual character, and pity its undeserved fate. So when their fears seemed vain—for the favorable wind kept blowing—they ceased to believe the bird one of good omen, in spite of its old friendliness, and ascribed to it the mists that now had cleared. They therefore congratulated the mariner, and his crime passed for a meritorious piece of prowess. So the Polar Spirit was free now to exact a penalty. All on board were alike guilty of a lack of "love," and the mariner's fellows, most of all, as was proved by the fact that he at least was "plagued" from the start by fiends of remorse, whilst they—approvers of the deed if its issues only were fortunate—tried to fix the whole guilt on the remorseful doer as soon as the general punishment began.

Death reaches them. The mariner falls to the lot of life-in-death. His remorse will make him a useful instrument of God, in spreading the true doctrine of "love." His fellows could be of no service whatever. Could they be released from danger, they would never pray to be "shriven" of any sin. The moral they would have carried away would have been: "If any one, by a loveless deed to God's creatures brings wrath upon us (who, though quite as loveless, have abstained from actual deeds), let us hate him, and then our hatred will purchase us pardon of the God of love!"

But the death of his fellows seems to the mariner himself an inexplicable mystery—an unjust doom visited on them for his own sin. He does not realize their guilt, greater even than his. He himself still thinks the reckless deed was his sin, not the lack of love. So to him they seem innocent. Their hatred, he had incurred, torments him. He sympathizes almost in their hatred of him. He hates his life, that is continued, when so many were stricken dead for his crime. And the continued life of the low creatures of the sea, his

only quick companions, now seems but another form of the same monstrous injustice. He would have them dead too, with himself, or his old shipmates alive and hale.

But at last he looks up to the moon, and then to the quiet stars. An ecstasy of joy in their beauty comes over him. He looks down and sees these same sea creatures which in the bitterness of his insane remorse he had cursed. Their beauty, their happiness, dazzles him. He blesses them:

A spring of love gushed from my heart,  
And I blessed them unaware.

His sin had been an unconscious one. His atonement, too, was unconscious. The remorse had only deepened his lack of love into a general hatred of life. But God's beauty stole over his spirit—emitted as divine light from all his creatures, stars and snakes alike—and the spell was lifted, the sin was blotted out, because the lovelessness whence it proceeded was neutralized by the new love. All that remained for him was such an expiation of his fault as should render the cure permanent; as should make indelible the impression produced by that vision of universal beauty—namely, the new deep-saving obligation of love to all that lives—and render him a lifelong apostle of the doctrine; conscious of a terrible “woe is me” if he preach it not everywhere and always to him that the Spirit should point out.

## II. THE PHILOSOPHY.

Often among a poet's works are found artistic failures, valuable only because they furnish the reader with a convenient commentary on his artistic successes. The latter usually maintain proud—nay, haughty—silence if cross-questioned as to the opinions of their author. A poet's prose works are not half so reliable. Often the man and the poet differ considerably. But these unhappy children of the poet are, nevertheless, a poet's children. They are brothers of his best offspring. In the case of Coleridge, “Religious Musings” and the “Destiny of Nations” are poems from which lines may be culled which give definite expression to his spiritual philosophy, and a number of quo-

tations will now be made with a current comment. It is not the part of the present writer to criticize, but merely to interpret.

What marks the higher man from the lower is chiefly a fuller development of what is nowadays termed the "social sense." Among the higher animals homes exist, monogamous lifelong relations of mates, and devoted care of the young. Villages of prairie-dogs or beavers, monarchical states and military republics among bees and ants, witness to this capacity for organization. With man alone does it bear spiritual fruits in a religious faith.

The savage roams,  
Feeling himself, his *own* low *self*, the *whole*.  
—*Religious Musings*.

If anything else enters into his notion of the "whole," it is the fear of fellow savage and the hope of plentiful game. Only after long experience of ever-enlarging horizons, as he climbs the great Mount of Vision, does he come to realize how

'Tis the sublime in man,  
Our noontide majesty, to know *ourselves*  
Parts and proportions of *one* wondrous *whole*.  
—*Religious Musings*.

The thought of a universe dawns on him. The thought of a universal consciousness brings the full spiritual day. Law and order everywhere the condition of beauty; everywhere this law and order the evidence of one living Will! Man himself part of this universe! If he put himself, then, in the right attitude toward it, he becomes one with it. As a hero's deeds are appropriated by his proud people, so the mountains, the plains, the seas, the beasts, the flowers, the dews, the skies, the sun, moon, and stars become man's very own.

The savage roams,  
Feeling himself, *his own* low *self*, the *whole*,  
When he by sacred sympathy might make  
The *whole* ONESELF. —*Ib.*

This attitude of mind is called "sacred sympathy." Why so? Actually (according to the philosophy of Coleridge), the unity of all things is the result of a Will holding them to-

gether, dwelling in each part as its life, and making out of them a larger whole, of which He is again the Life in a more intimate sense. But because men's physical organs are separately impressed by things each in turn, things seem not only distinct but separate entities. Here is a stone; there, a tree. Only after much experience do we learn that they are parts of one planet. Here is our earth; there in the heavens are Mars, Venus, and Saturn. Only after centuries of study have we learned that they are part of one solar system. Here is the sun; there is Sirius or Aldebaran. Only in the future will we understand how they constitute one stellar universe. Now we *know* things are united. We utter our conviction whenever we use the word "universe." But we continue to perceive things separate. God makes them *be*, in fact, one whole. We can make them *appear* to us as God makes them be. For this we must share the divine mood; we must be in "sacred sympathy" with him; we must do in our little world of thoughts and feelings that correspond to the external things what He does with the things themselves: unify them, and impart to them of our *one life*.

But from the great unity men's minds are not excluded.

As one body seems the aggregate  
Of atoms numberless, each organized,  
So by a strange and dim similitude  
Infinite myriads of *self-conscious minds*  
*Are one all-conscious SPIRIT.*

—*Destiny of Nations.*

When the man has become sufficiently spiritual to hold a conception of this substantial unity of the soul with God, he becomes eager to realize the conception. He will not have it remain a barren piece of philosophic speculation. We are self-conscious. We only infer God. Why are we not as directly conscious of God as we are of ourselves? Because our eyes are impure? How shall we, then, purify them?

The drowsed soul  
. . . Of its nobler nature 'gan to feel  
Dim recollections, and thence soared to hope; . . .  
From hope and firmer faith to perfect love  
Attracted and absorbed; and centered there,



God only to behold and know and feel,  
 Till, by *exclusive consciousness of God*  
 (All self-annihilated), *it shall make*  
 God *its identity*—God all in all,  
 We and our Father ONE. —*Religious Musings.*

This is but a poetical description of the old method common to all the saints of the Catholic Church, that of devout meditation. Mystical systems differ in nomenclature; specific methods differ also in details; but, directly or indirectly, all aim at denial as forgetfulness of self. Self stands out against self, mutually repellent forever. What is mine cannot be thine; what is thine must be mine. To affirm and remember self (the opposite of self-denial or self-forgetfulness) involves eternal warfare. How shall the self be denied effectually or forgotten? Only by the affirmation and perpetual remembrance of One who includes both, who is *me* more truly than I am, and yet is as really my friend and my foe alike. The thought of my origin in God makes me wonder at my possibilities. I hope to be other than I am. I trust I shall indeed become all that I vaguely descry, and more. I love That whence I came, whither I go, and which upholds me now upon my way. I feel this God as my *very SELF*. Do I who believe myself a child of God dare call this man that I appear to be, myself? If I remember him, I deny him. Probably, however, I am so attracted and absorbed by the supreme beauty that I have utterly forgotten him. So the old *self-love* has become SELF-love; the old selfishness, selflessness—the love of all in ONE.

What becomes of the sensible world to one so rapt in the vision of God?

All that meet the bodily sense  
 I deem *symbolical*. —*Destiny of Nations.*

Far indeed is he from growing indifferent to it. He shall (Coleridge's wish for his infant son)

Wander like a breeze  
 By lakes and sandy shores, beneath the crags  
 Of ancient mountains, and beneath the clouds  
 Which image in their bulk both lakes and shores  
 And mountain crags: so shalt thou see and hear  
 The lovely shapes and sounds intelligible

Of that *eternal language*, which thy God  
Utters, who from eternity doth teach  
Himself in all, and all things in himself.  
Great Universal Teacher! He shall mold  
Thy Spirit, and by giving make it ask.

—*Frost at Midnight.*

In a certain sense, to be sure, the mystic will despise all things. He will not, at all events, prize the sound of the eternal language more than its sense. He will never wish to rest in things. He will spurn them under foot, yet only because he is

Treading . . . all visible things  
As steps that upward to the Father's throne  
Lead—  
—*Religious Musings.*

Should there come, however, a time when he can see, not feel, how beautiful they are, all the glorious things in earth and sky, will any diligent contemplation of their beauty make him once more "feel" what he only "sees." Surely not. "Outward Forms" cannot yield

The passion and the life whose fountains are within.—*Ib.*

For, of a truth, "we receive but what we give," and to us at least

In our life alone does nature live.  
—*Dejection.*

If we are to behold God in nature, or aught of his glory,

Oh, from the soul itself must issue forth  
A light, a glory, a fair luminous cloud  
Enveloping the earth. —*Ib.*

This beautiful and beauty-making power may best be called "joy," "life and life's effluence."

We in ourselves rejoice.—*Ib.*

And this "joy" the pure in heart have given to them of God, as a babe the milk from its mother. Of this inner "joy" comes the power to see in nature a divine, continuous sacrament. For this "joy" itself is the witness of the Spirit, and reveals God in us and nature, and makes of all that is in turn a vehicle of our fervent worship—the prayer becoming visible to the eye as Mt. Blanc that cleaves with his peak of sunlit snows the heaven of heavens.

## III. THE HOMILY.

To many it may perhaps prove an unwelcome thought that a poem they have enjoyed merely as a poem should have anything to teach them. There are those who irreverently remark that the poets probably see no farther than their respective noses. If so, I fear some have noses that will considerably damage the classic profile of their poetic owners. Not a few give evidences of being exceptionally far-sighted. Things close at hand they do not see. Things at a great distance seem close at hand. They live in anticipated joys. In winter-time for them the trees are full-leaved, the bushes in blossom, the air shivering with song, and richly charged with manifold fragrance. Social conditions that the wildest theorist regards as possibly existing on the earth centuries hence are to the poet, if only he perceives their causes at work, already realized. We have the habit of estimating distances by the relative distinctness of the objects fixed by the eye; what we see in detail we imagine near, what appears blurred and indefinite we suppose to be far off. Now the poet, as man, does what we all do in this matter. When, however, the poetic fury assails him, he becomes preternaturally keen sighted. The indefinite defines itself, the vague stands out boldly, the neutral tints give birth to many brilliant colors; but his old habit of judging of distances remains in force, and so he cries, "Behold! it is at hand! it is at the very doors!" And such has been always the custom of prophets, not that for rhetorical effect they eliminated the element of time, and deliberately represented processes as finished products, but that they themselves were ignorant of "times and seasons."

Just because a poet is free to speak what he thinks, feels, and fancies, without any sense of obligation to his past self, to logic or structural consistency; because he is by common consent emancipated from the tyranny of premises, as one is in dreams; just because no sane reader will call him to account for every word, or expect him to define his terms and avoid equivocation, or explain away the difficulties he seems to create in his progress; for these very reasons is he fitted

to promulgate difficult doctrines. We often know the truth before we can prove it; the facts are not all given, the premises cannot even be framed, yet the conclusion is already certain. Should one appear as a witness to such "transcendental truths" in the garb and guise of a moral philosopher, we should undoubtedly subject him to the severest cross-questioning; and if we succeeded in confusing him by our impertinences and technical objections, we should declare him perjured, and scoff at his difficult doctrine as false and absurd. But a poet we treat more graciously. He comes to give us pleasure. If incidentally in pleasing us he insinuates a bit of doctrine, we blink the fact in case the doctrine is not such as we favor. But the skilfulest poet will cunningly oblige the reader to assume the doctrine just for the nonce, because otherwise the full pleasure of the poem cannot be obtained. He does not insist that you shall believe the doctrine, much less put it into practise! He may himself do neither. He himself may only have "assumed" it.

When Coleridge makes the ancient mariner prefer

To walk together to the kirk  
With a goodly company!  
To walk together to the kirk,  
And all together pray,

to the marriage-feast and all its "loud uproar" the "bridesmaids singing," and "in the garden bower the bride;" when he goes farther yet, and prefers simple philanthropy and gentle consideration for animals to the formal worship, saying:

He prayeth well who loveth well  
Both man and bird and beast.  
He prayeth best who loveth best  
All things both great and small;  
For the dear God who loveth us,  
He made and loveth all—

when Coleridge says these things, so earnestly but so picturesquely, and has them not on his own lips, but puts them in the mouth of a wise old madman, why of course no one presumes to contradict him!

Perhaps some reader may remember the savage words of a certain critic to the effect that poor Coleridge "had no

morals;" another will recall his shiftlessness, his incapacity of continuous devotion to duty, his practical desertion of wife and children, his unfortunate opium habit! And all this is, alas! too true. An apology can be framed. He who knows the intoxication of the Spirit, and who for personal faults has in some manner driven him away, may be tempted to obtain from drugs a stimulation that shall deceive him momentarily into believing himself once more visited from heaven. Our "Rime," however, dates from his best year, his twenty-seventh. The "shaping spirit of the imagination" walked with him often. For companion besides he had his friend Wordsworth, and his home was sunny with hope. This man, who could philosophize so acutely, and hold all England spellbound by his strange eloquence, knew well that "abstruse research," whatever his demands, did not require inspiration, not even the exercise of strenuous will, while good poetry assuredly does.

Now the lines beginning "He prayeth well" are not a homiletic after-thought. They constitute the very germ of the whole poem. But Coleridge, with an artist's true cunning, does not betray the secret of his "Rime" till it is well-nigh ended.

Accept for one moment as true the thought of a conscious omnipotent Source of Being, a God who is truly the universal Father. All that he has made must be well made. All must reflect his character, all must be very good. If not, he would not preserve it with loving care. Grant, furthermore, that a relation with this God is possible to his intelligent creature man; that he is given some natural mode of access, no matter how difficult; that he is, therefore, competent to form some conception of His being, and to feel love for Him. How can you now escape the doctrine of the "Rime?" The true worshiper finds that, whether he will or no,

From himself he flies,  
Stands in the sun, and with no partial gaze  
Views all creation; and he *loves* it *all*,  
And blesses it, and calls it very good.

—*Religious Musings.*

God's universal fatherhood implies a universal brother-

hood of all created things. Conversely he who, from abounding "joy" within, calls all very good, blesses it, and loves it all, finds himself, whether he will or no, transported to the central Sun, sees things from the divine point of view, and so enters into "sacred sympathy" with that "Sun," that he is at length wholly rapt in the thought of "God all in all," and in the feeling for which there are no words; "he and his Father—ONE." From the universal brotherhood of created things, which to the poet, when in poetic mood, is axiomatic, one can reason transcendently to a universal Father.

From God to nature; from nature to God.

Nature . . . may well employ  
Each faculty of sense, and keep the heart  
Awake to love and beauty.  
No sound is dissonant which tells of life.

—*This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison.*

For is not all life from the Father of lives? Is not biology in a certain sense theology? Even the "foal of an ass" would the poet take with him

In the dell  
Of peace and mild equality to dwell.

—*To a Young Ass.*

Wherefore not? Is not God seen as well in least as in greatest? Indeed, what tests a worshiper's sincerity? Humble before God when conscious of his presence? or rather, tender to His weaker creatures where

So lovely 'twas, that God himself  
Scarce seemed there to be?

To love them that love us is surely no wonderful virtue! To love them that can help us may be mere selfish prudence. But love for God's sake is most distinctly seen when it goes out to those whose need is greatest, and therefore whose own claims are least. The love at the wedding-feast, if it be really love, goes out to bride and—albatross! Not merely the love that after long loneliness "hails it in God's name," "as if it had been a Christian soul;" but the love that makes murder as difficult as suicide; that considers the dignity of life, and the glory of the Life-Giver, rather

than the use of the individual living thing for us; the love that makes the unnecessary killing of fellow beast as loathsome as the unnecessary killing of fellow man.

Somewhat fanatical doctrine, you object? Is not war an honorable calling? Is not hunting of animals a most respectable manly sport? The poet has no answer to make to your objections or to mine. If he hears us, he shrugs his shoulders, and smiles ironically. He is bound to poetical logic alone. The germ of his poem was love. If God loves all, and we love God, we must love all. If we love all, we would harm none. Do we then love God? Such is the question the poet insists on asking. And he reminds us that we, to whom he has told his tale, need it:

I know the man that must hear me;  
To him my tale I teach.

We are wedding-guests? We are in haste? So much the worse for us. We shall have to wait. His glittering eye will hold us. He will hint that we are wedding-guests indeed, bidden by another Bridegroom. Long afterward, whether we agree with them or not, his words will go on obstinately ringing in our ears:

O happy living things! no tongue  
Their beauty might declare;  
A spring of love gushed from my heart,  
And I blessed them unaware!  
The self-same moment I could pray!

. . . . .  
He prayeth well who loveth well  
Both man and bird and beast.  
He prayeth best who loveth best.  
All things both great and small;  
For the dear God who loveth us,  
He made and loveth all.

WILLIAM NORMAN GUTHRIE.